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ON PAGE 4 - Sec. 1

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Former Sandinista hero plots their overthrow

By George de Lama

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SAN JOSE, Costa Rica—They came out of nowhere, their faces covered with hoods and masks. Unleashing their automatic rifles, they blasted through stunned army guards and stormed the palace.

More than 1,000 people attending a meeting of the Chamber of Deputies inside Nicaragua's National Palace had little chance of escape. They were hostages to be exchanged for the freedom of key Sandinista guerrillas held prisoner by the regime of former dictator Anastasio Somoza.

The pictures published around the world afterwards showed the guerrilla leader, known then only as "Commander Zero," triumphantly waving his AK-47 automatic rifle high in the air as he boarded a plane carrying his fellow Sandinistas and some of their hostages to Panama.

With that brazen act in August of 1978, Eden Pastora Gomez became world-famous and trumpeted the beginning of the end for the United States-backed Somoza dictatorship, changing the face of Central America.

Now the former Sandinista leader sits in uneasy exile, holed up in his mountainside retreat with loyal followers who share his deep disillusionment over what they consider the authoritarian and Marxist turn their revolution has taken.

AS HE DID once before, Eden Pastora has committed himself to the overthrow of a regime in Nicaragua. With help, he insists, his wide popularity within Nicaragua would allow him to restore the democratic, pluralistic society Pastora thought he had fought for.

But the help, his backers say, is not coming their way. Complaining that the Reagan administration is repeating the errors of another American administration in Cuba more than 20 years ago, Pastora is on the outside looking in.

In a wide-ranging interview last week, Pastora argued that by backing the ex-Somoza national guardsmen who operate against the Sandinistas from bases in Honduras, the Reagan administration is heading towards another Bay of Pigs disaster.

● U.S. banks lend \$30 million to Nicaragua despite Reagan opposition to such aid. Page 16.

"Nicaraguans will die to prevent the return of the Somocistas," he said. "They can be defeated only by the United States Army. The cost would be big in lives, and politically, forget it. It would ipso facto legitimize the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan."

CHARGING THAT the ex-national guardsmen are tainted because of atrocities under Somoza's rule, Pastora said he has refused repeated overtures by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and Nicaraguan exiles to join forces with the "contras," as the counter-revolutionaries are known.

"I would rather die first," he said. "I am a committed revolutionary, not a counter-revolutionary."

As a result of his refusal, Pastora said, his followers have been denied the U.S. support and the Honduran military backing he said is enjoyed by the right-wing rebels of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) who operate out of Honduras.

In the process, he argued, Washington is unwittingly strengthening the hand of the nine-member Sandinista National Directorate that rules Nicaragua, despite widespread internal discontent with the regime. It is a view shared by leading opposition figures within Nicaragua.

"To topple the directorate, the only way will be for the Nicaraguan people to rise in arms and overthrow it," Pastora said. "But to do that, you have to remove from Nicaragua the menace of the past, the shadow of the Somocistas."

SITTING IN HIS office here with a .45 automatic in his belt and a Uzi submachinegun at his side, Pastora recounted his gradual disillusionment with the regime installed by his former Sandinista colleagues.

He told of Soviet KGB attempts to enlist him as a spy against the nine-member directorate and of his journey last year to Panama, where he felt threatened after the death of strongman Omar Torrijos, his longtime mentor.

From there, he said he went to Cuba to meet with Guatemalan guerrilla leaders "because to meet them, to know them, you must go to Cuba," he said.

Distrusted by Cuban President Fidel Castro, Pastora said he was kept under virtual house arrest for more than four months "in a mansion, with all amenities and a black Mercedes Benz out front for my use."

After international pressure about rumors of his detention, he said, Castro let him leave the island. From there he came to Costa Rica, surfacing in April to call for the overthrow of the present Sandinista regime.

"I did not tell them in Cuba I was going to do that," he said. "They not only wouldn't have let me leave, they would have killed me."

PASTORA EMPHASIZED that he remains a Sandinista, a devoted disciple of Cesar Augusto Sandino, the Nicaraguan peasant who led armed opposition to occupying U.S. Marines in the late 1920s.

Along with Miskito Indian leader Brooklyn Rivera and prominent Nicaraguan businessman Alfonso Robelo, a former member of the first ruling Sandinista junta who resigned in 1981, Pastora and his followers are part of the Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE), a Costa Rica-based group whose acronym means "to burn."

Together, ARDE's leaders command a substantial following within Nicaragua, U.S. officials and Central American experts concede.

The group's stated aims call for replacing the current Sandinista leadership with a democratic system that includes free elections, freedom of the press and a rapid demilitarization of the country.

Describing itself as center-left, the group is considered Communist by some of the rival FDN exiles who enjoy U.S. support. Some of the right-wing exiles who have congregated in Miami say Pastora is half-crazy, even though they admit they could use his prestige on their side.

U.S. OFFICIALS have refused comment on Pastora's charges. But one American expert in the region said, "There is nobody to rival Pastora when it comes to support within Nicaragua, especially within the Sandinista armed forces."

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